

Training truck mechanics

Students learning about fleet maintenance through Valley College

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It's pretty clear to Paul Vanderfin why he's striving to become a master diesel truck technician.

Without truck mechanics, big rigs stop rolling down the nation's highways, he says.

"Without trucks, America stops - that's all there is to it," he added.

The Highland resident was one out of 28 students learning about fleet maintenance on the grounds of San Bernardino International Airport on Thursday morning at San Bernardino Valley College's Transportation Center, a logistics-related vocational education center.

He and 19 other students are getting \$1,000 from the county's Workforce Investment Board to pay for tuition, books and tools in the college's fleet maintenance program. It's WIB's first time putting resources toward such a project.

Most of these students are just beginning, but Vanderfin is already ahead of the game.

Besides working at B and B Trucks in Bloomington when he was a teenager, he just quit his Nevada-based truck-driving job he's had for the last five years. He estimates he's driven more than 1 million miles.

"When these guys get out, they'll know what they're working with," Vanderfin said about the fleet maintenance students. "You need to be able to

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take this truck, drive it in the bay, and unhook it. If you don't know that, you're in trouble."

Knowing what you're doing is important in the freight transportation industry, said Phil Cothran, chairman of WIB's business-relations committee.

"We looked at business owners to see what their needs are," he said about a meeting WIB had with a dozen Inland Empire trucking companies in July. "First on the table was the diesel mechanic. They have a lot of job openings. We don't mind putting our resources behind that to make that happen."

Students watched intently that morning as course instructor Dan Hook hooked and unhooked a faded Roadway trailer onto an old Slaton Trucking diesel truck, emphasizing the cranks, turns and hands-on mechanics of getting the job done.

But this was only the first step of the journey.

Hook proudly showed off the program's warehouse full of old diesel engines and mechanical contraptions that were donated to the program. Students will eventually learn the ins and outs of these blocks of metal.

"Workforce (Investment Board) has done wonders for our program," he said.

This semester, Hook's course has one of the highest enrollments he's ever seen.

"They would've canceled every class last year, if they went by the rules," he said about the college.

Hook knows there are San Bernardino area residents interested in becoming part of the transportation freight industry - it's just a matter of finding them, he said.

"The high schools have forgotten the term `craftsman,'" he said. "They've forgotten to tell students that there's honor in being a craftsman."

And money, too.

Vanderfin says he'll start out at \$27 an hour with benefits when he gets certified as a master technician.

"He's the guy that looks at you and says, `Go fix that,'" Vanderfin said while chuckling.

With the logistics industry in the infant stages of boom in the Inland Empire, there's huge potential for students in the transportation program, according to Mike Siebert, director of maintenance for Apex Bulk Commodities Inc. in Fontana and Adelanto.

"Everything from changing the oil, to lubing the vehicles, to building engines, electronics, air conditioning and air-brake system," he said about fleet maintenance positions for which trucking firms will increasingly be hiring.

It takes about one mechanic to keep 10-15 trucks on the road, Siebert said. He's also on the diesel truck technology course advisory committee at the college.

"This gives them a chance to get their hands dirty, learn a career, and starts them off at about \$15 an hour," he said.

Hook said WIB is giving these students an opportunity to be proud of big vocational accomplishments.

"There's a lot of pride in accomplishing what we do, in saying, `That truck that's going down the road is fixed, and I did it,'" Hook said. "It doesn't matter where you go in the world - they have trucks. It's lifetime work."